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CANADIAN NEGROES AND THE JOHN BROWN RAID

Canada and Canadians were intimately connected with the most dramatic incident in the slavery struggle prior to the opening of the Civil War, the attack of John Brown and his men on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, on the night of Sunday, October 16, 1859. The blow that Brown struck at slavery in this attack had been planned on broad lines in Canada more than a year before at a convention held in Chatham, Ontario, May 8-10, 1858. In calling this convention in Canada, Brown doubtless had two objects in view: to escape observation and to interest the Canadian Negroes in his plans for freeing their enslaved race on a scale never before dreamed of and in a manner altogether new. It was Brown's idea to gather a band of determined and resourceful men, to plant them somewhere in the Appalachian mountains near slave territory and from their mountain fastness to run off the slaves, ever extending the area of operations and eventually settling the Negroes in the territory that they had long tilled for others. He believed that operations of this kind would soon demoralize slavery in the South and he counted upon getting enough help from Canada to give the initial impetus.

What went on at Chatham in May, 1858, is fairly definitely known. Brown came to Chatham on April 30 and sent out invitations to what he termed "a quiet convention . . . of true friends of freedom," requesting attendance on May 10. The sessions were held on May 8th and 10th, Saturday and Monday, and were attended by twelve white men and thirty-three Negroes. William C. Munroe, a colored preacher, acted as chairman. Brown himself made the opening and principal speech of the convention, outlining plans for carrying on a guerilla warfare against the whites,

which would free the slaves, who might afterwards be settled in the more mountainous districts. He expected that many of the free Negroes in the Northern States would flock to his standard, that slaves in the South would do the same, and that some of the free Negroes in Canada would also accompany him.

The main business before the convention was the adoption of a constitution for the government of Brown's black followers in the carrying out of his weird plan of forcible emancipation. Copies of the constitution were printed after the close of the Chatham gathering and furnished evidence against Brown and his companions when their plans came to ground and they were tried in the courts of Virginia. Brown himself was elected commander-in-chief, J. H. Kagi was named secretary of war, George B. Gill, secretary of the treasury, Owen Brown, one of his sons, treasurer, Richard Realf, secretary of state, and Alfred M. Ellsworth and Osborn Anderson, colored, were named members of Congress.

It was more than a year before Brown could proceed to the execution of his plan. Delays of various kinds had upset his original plans, but early in June, 1859, he went to Harper's Ferry with three companions and rented a farm near that town. Others joined them at intervals until at the time of their raid he had eighteen followers, four of whom were Negroes. The story of the attack and its failure need not be told here. It is sufficient to say that when the fighting ended on Tuesday morning, October 18, John Brown himself was wounded and a prisoner; ten of his party, including two of his sons, were dead, and the others were fugitives from justice. Brown was given a preliminary examination on October 25th and on the following day was brought to trial at Charlestown. Public sentiment in Virginia undoubtedly called for a speedy trial, but there was evidence of panicky feeling in the speed with which John Brown was rushed to punishment. On Monday, October 31, the jury, after 45 minutes' deliberation, returned a verdict

of guilty of treason, conspiracy with slaves to rebel and murder in the first degree. On November 2nd, sentence was pronounced, that Brown should be hanged on December 2nd. As the trap dropped under him that day, Col. Preston, who commanded the military escort, pronounced the words: "So perish all such enemies of Virginia. All such enemies of the Union. All such foes of the human race." That was the unanimous sentiment of Virginia. But in the North Longfellow wrote in his journal: "This will be a great date in our history; the date of a new revolution, quite as much needed as the old one."¹ And Thoreau declared: "Some 1800 years ago Christ was crucified; this morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung. These are the two ends of a chain that is not without its links."²

John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry made a profound impression in Canada. Although the Chatham convention had been secret there were some Canadians who knew that Brown was meditating a bold stroke and could see at once the connection between Chatham and Harper's Ferry. The raid was reported in detail in the Canadian press and widely commented upon editorially. In a leading article extending over more than one column of its issue of November 4, 1859, *The Globe*, of Toronto, points out that the execution of Brown will but serve to make him remembered as "a brave man who perilled property, family, life itself, for an alien race." His death, continued the editor, would make the raid valueless as political capital for the South, which might expect other Browns to arise. References in this article to the Chatham convention indicate that George Brown, editor of *The Globe*, knew what had been going on in Canada in May, 1858. Three weeks later, *The Globe*, with fine discernment, declared that if the tension between north and south continued, civil war would be inevitable and "no force that the south can raise can hold the slaves if

¹ Longfellow, *Life of Longfellow*, vol. II, p. 347.

² Thoreau, *A Plea for Capt. John Brown*, read at Concord, October 30, 1859.

the north wills that they be free.”³ On the day of Brown’s execution *The Globe* said: “His death will aid in awakening the north to that earnest spirit which can alone bring the south to understand its true position,” and added that it was a “rare sight to witness the ascent of this fine spirit out of the money-hunting, cotton-worshipping American world.”⁴ Once again, with insight into American affairs it predicted that “if a Republican president is elected next year, nothing short of a dissolution of the union will satisfy them” (the cotton States).

The special interest taken by *The Globe* in American affairs and its sane comment on the developments in the slavery struggle were due to George Brown’s understanding of the situation, resulting from his residence for a time under the stars and stripes before coming to Canada. The feeling of the public in Toronto over the execution of John Brown was shown by the large memorial service held in St. Lawrence Hall on Dec. 11, 1859, at which the chief speaker was Rev. Thomas M. Kinnaird, who had himself attended the Chatham convention.⁵ In his address Mr. Kinnaird referred to a talk he had had with Brown, in which the latter said that he intended to do something definite for the liberation of the slaves or perish in the attempt. The collection that was taken up at this meeting was forwarded to Mrs. Brown. At Montreal a great mass meeting was held in St. Bonaventure Hall, attended by over one thousand people, at which resolutions of sympathy were passed. Among those on the platform at this meeting were L. H. Holton, afterwards a member of the Brown-Dorion and Macdonald-Dorion administrations, and John Dougall, founder of *The Montreal Witness*. At Chatham and other places in the western part of the province similar meetings were held.

The slave-holding States were by no means blind to the amount of support and encouragement that was coming

³ *Toronto Weekly Globe*, Nov. 25, 1859.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Dec. 9, 1859, and Dec. 16, 1859.

⁵ *Toronto Weekly Globe*, Dec. 12, 1859.

from Canada for the abolitionists.⁶ They were quite aware that Canada itself had an active abolitionist group. They probably had heard of the Chatham convention; they knew of it, at least, as soon as the raid was over. In his message to the legislature of Virginia immediately after the Harper's Ferry incident Governor Wise made direct reference to the anti-slavery activity in Canada. "This was no result of ordinary crimes," he declared. "... It was an extraordinary and actual invasion, by a sectional organization, specially upon slaveholders and upon their property in negro slaves. . . . A provisional government was attempted in a British province, by our own countrymen, united to us in the faith of confederacy, combined with Canadians, to invade the slave-holding states . . . for the purpose of stirring up universal insurrection of slaves throughout the whole south."⁷

Speaking further of what he conceived to be the spirit of the North he said: "It has organized in Canada and traversed and corresponded thence to New Orleans and from Boston to Iowa. It has established spies everywhere, and has secret agents in the heart of every slave state, and has secret associations and 'underground railroads' in every free state."⁸

Speaking on December 22, 1859, to a gathering of medical students who had left Philadelphia, Governor Wise is quoted as saying: "With God's help we will drive all the disunionists together back into Canada. Let the compact of fanaticism and intolerance be confined to British soil."⁹ *The New York Herald* quoted Governor Wise as calling upon the President to notify the British Government that

⁶ "There is no country in the world so much hated by slaveholders as Canada," Ward, *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro*, London, 1855, p. 158.

⁷ *Journal of the Senate of Virginia*, 1859, see pp. 9-25.

⁸ *The Toronto Weekly Globe* of Dec. 6, 1859, reported Governor Wise as saying: "One most irritating feature of this predatory war is that it has its seat in the British provinces which furnish asylum for our fugitives and send them and their hired outlaws upon us from depots and rendezvous in the bordering states."

⁹ *Toronto Weekly Globe*, Dec. 28, 1859.

Canada should no longer be allowed, by affording an asylum to fugitive slaves, to foster disunion and dissension in the United States. Wise even seems to have had the idea that the President might be bullied into provoking trouble with Great Britain over this question. "The war shall be carried into Canada," he said in one of his outbursts.¹⁰

Sympathy for the South was shown in the comment of a part of the Tory press in Canada, *The Leader* declaring that Brown's attack on Harper's Ferry was an "insane raid" and predicting that the South would sacrifice the union before submitting to such spoliation.¹¹ The viewpoint of *The Leader* and its readers may be further illustrated by its declaration that the election campaign of 1860 was dominated by a "small section of ultra-abolitionists who make anti-slavery the beginning, middle and end of their creed." As for Lincoln he was characterized as "a mediocre man and a fourth-rate lawyer,"¹² but then some of the prominent American newspapers made quite as mistaken an estimate of Lincoln at that time.

The collapse of John Brown's great adventure at Harper's Ferry furnished complete proof to the South of Canada's relation to that event. The seizure of his papers and all that they told, the evidence at the trial at Charleston and the evidence secured by the Senatorial Committee which investigated the affair, all confirmed the suspicion that in the British provinces to the north there was extensive plotting against the slavery system. The Senatorial Committee declared in its findings that the proceedings at Chatham had had as their object "to subvert the government of one or more of the States, and, of course, to that extent the government of the United States."¹³ Questions were asked of the witnesses before the investigating committee which showed that in the minds of the members of that committee there was a distinctly Canadian end to the Harper's Ferry

¹⁰ *Toronto Weekly Globe*, Dec. 28, 1859.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Dec. 23, 1859.

¹² *Ibid.*, July 20, 1860.

¹³ *Harper's Ferry Invasion, Report of Senatorial Committee*, pp. 2 and 7.

tragedy.¹⁴ Their suspicions may have been further confirmed by the fact that Brown's New England confederates, Sanborn, Stearns and Howe, all fled to Canada immediately after the raid.

In the actual events at Harper's Ferry the assistance given by Canada was small. Of the men who marched out with Brown on that fateful October night only one could in any way be described as a Canadian. This was Osborn Perry Anderson, a Negro born free in Pennsylvania. He was working as a printer in Chatham at the time of the convention and threw in his lot with Brown. He was one of those who escaped at Harper's Ferry. He later wrote an account of the affair, served during the latter part of the Civil War in the northern army and died at Washington in 1871. He is described by Hinton as "well educated, a man of natural dignity, modest, simple in character and manners."¹⁵

There naturally arises the question, why was the aid given John Brown by the Canadian Negroes so meagre? That Brown had counted on considerable help in his enterprise from the men who joined with him in drafting the "provisional constitution" is certain. John Edwin Cook, one of Brown's close associates, declared in his confession made after Harper's Ferry, that "men and money had both been promised from Chatham and other parts of Canada."¹⁶ Yet, apart from Anderson, a Negro, only one other Canadian of either color seems to have had any share in the raid. Dr. Alexander Milton Ross went to Richmond, Virginia, before the blow was struck, as he had promised Brown he would do, and was there when word came of its unhappy ending. Brown evidently counted on Ross being able to keep him in touch with developments at the capital of Virginia.

Chatham had been chosen as the place of meeting with special reference to the effect it might have on the large

¹⁴ *Harper's Ferry Invasion, Report of Senatorial Committee*, p. 99.

¹⁵ Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, pp. 504-507.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, appendix, p. 704. See also report of Senatorial Committee, p. 97.

Negro population resident in the immediate vicinity. There were more Negroes within fifty miles of Chatham than in any other section of Canadian territory and among them were men of intelligence, education and daring, some of them experienced in slave raiding. Brown was justified in expecting help from them. There is also evidence that among the Negroes themselves there existed a secret organization, known under various names, having as its object to assist fugitives and resist their masters. Help from this organization was also expected.¹⁷ Hinton says that Brown "never expected any more aid from them than that which would give a good impetus."¹⁸ John Brown himself is quoted by Realf, one of his associates, as saying that he expected aid from the Negroes generally, both in Canada and the United States,¹⁹ but it must be remembered that his plans called for quality rather than quantity of assistance. A few daring men, planted in the mountains of Virginia, would have accomplished his initial purpose better than a thousand.

The real reason why the Canadian Negroes failed to respond in the summer of 1860 when Brown's men were gathering near the boundary line of slavery seems to be that too great a delay followed after the Chatham convention. The convention was held on May 8 and 10, 1858; but Brown did not attack Harper's Ferry until the night of October 16, 1859, nearly a year and a half later. The zeal for action that manifested itself in May, 1858, had cooled off by October, 1859, the magnetic influence of Brown himself had been withdrawn, and the Negroes had entered into new engagements. Frank B. Sanborn says he understood from Brown that he hoped to strike about the middle of May of 1858, that is about a week after the convention or as soon as his forces could gather at the required point.²⁰ The delay was caused by the partial exposure of Brown's

¹⁷ Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, pp. 171-172.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

¹⁹ *Report of Senatorial Committee*, p. 97.

²⁰ Sanborn, *Life and Letters of John Brown*, pp. 457-8.

plans to Senator Henry Wilson by Hugh Forbes, who had been close to Brown. Panic seized Brown's chief white supporters in New England, the men who financed his various operations, and they decided that the plans must be changed. Brown was much discouraged by their decision, but being dependent upon them for support in his work he submitted and went west to Kansas. Among his exploits there was the running off of more than a dozen slaves whom he landed safely at Windsor, Canada.

There was some effort made in the early summer of 1859 to enlist the support of the Canadian Negroes,²¹ the mission being in charge of John Brown, Jr., who was assisted by Rev. J. W. Loguen, a well-known Negro preacher and anti-slavery worker. Together they visited Hamilton, St. Catharines, Chatham, London, Buxton and Windsor, helping also to organize branches of the League of Liberty among the Negroes. The letters of John Brown, Jr., show that there was little enthusiasm for the cause, which, indeed, could only have been presented in an indefinite way. There was more interest at Chatham than elsewhere, as might be expected, but even there it was not sufficiently substantial to bring the men that were needed. Against this rather dismal picture should be placed some evidence that there were a few Canadians on the way South when the end came.²²

FRED LANDON.

²¹ Sanborn, *Life and Letters of John Brown*, pp. 536-538, 547.

²² Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*, pp. 261-263.